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High Achievement for All: Tackling the long-standing underachievement, and its consequences, for disadvantaged children and young people in the Tees Valley

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High Achievement for All

Tackling the long-standing underachievement, and its consequences, for disadvantaged children and young people in the Tees Valley.

Findings from the Transforming Tees research project in Tees Valley schools
(October 2015-July 2017)

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September 2017

Transforming Tees

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The team are grateful for the assistance and guidance provided by Professor Steve Higgins, University of Durham, for his on-going support to the research project and to Sir John Dunford (former government pupil premium champion) for his contribution to the project. Also, the team would like to thank Richard Wilkinson (lead for strand 3 'Work Readiness') for directly engaging with us in the secondary school research phase.

In total, more than 30 primary and special schools and more than 1/3 of Tees Valley secondary schools were directly involved in the research. We would like to thank all those headteachers, senior and middle leaders, teaching and non-teaching staff, governors, parents and pupils who gave their time and expertise so generously to support this work.

These research findings form the basis of a set of practical tools that schools can access to review their provision and outcomes for disadvantaged pupils. These materials were co-designed and tested with a group of Tees Valley national and local leaders in education.

- High Achievement School Audit
- High Achievement Review Handbook

Strand 1: High Achievement for All:

Tackling the long-standing underachievement, and its consequences, for disadvantaged children and young people in the Tees Valley.

CONTEXT

It is clear from the performance data (2012-2016) that disadvantaged pupils underachieve when compared to other pupils in both primary and secondary schools across the Tees Valley. While this position is strikingly evident at all key stages, the on-going consequences of this underachievement is reflected in the disproportionate numbers of disadvantaged young people who are not in employment, education or training (NEET) at both 16-18 and 19-24. It represents a waste of potential, severely limits the skills available to the local economy and has significant long-term consequences for the life choices available to this group.

Performance summary:

In the Early Years and Key Stage 1, girls consistently outperform boys while outcomes for disadvantaged children are low. At this early age, there is a wide gap in the performance of disadvantaged children when compared to their non-disadvantaged peers. Impressive gains for this group are made at Key Stage 2 in many schools so that many disadvantaged pupils catch up with other pupils nationally in reading, writing and mathematics. Nonetheless, too many of this cohort by age 11 continue to underperform so that in some Tees Valley local authority areas disadvantaged pupils remain well behind the standards achieved by other pupils.

The better progress evident at Key Stage 2 is not maintained in the secondary sector with many students failing to make the gains they should. Low and middle attaining pupils, those who are disadvantaged and boys demonstrate the weakest performance. In addition, too few more-able pupils (most notably those who are disadvantaged) reach the standards they should. Consequently, outcomes by the end of Key Stage 4 are below or well below average in most Tees Valley local authority areas.

At Key Stage 5, examination data show that fewer post-16 pupils in the Tees Valley will achieve higher A level grades by age 18 than in any English region. Performance in STEM subjects is particularly weak. The North East sits slightly below the national average at post-16 in the proportion of pupils gaining Level 2 qualifications (including English and mathematics by age 19) and disadvantaged pupils again do less well than others. Tees Valley young people overall have a much higher chance of being NEET at 16-18 and 19-25 as rates here are the highest in England. If you are a disadvantaged student, you are three times more likely to be NEET than your non-disadvantaged peers.

Outstanding outcomes in the Tees Valley

While the overall picture is disappointing, there are outstanding examples of excellent practice leading to high achievement for the disadvantaged group in schools across all local authority areas in the Tees Valley and at all key stages. This research identifies what these schools are doing to promote high achievement and shows what is being done to support pupils as they move into the world of work and further and higher education.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study was undertaken as part of the Transforming Tees initiative. The work of more than 30 Tees Valley primary and special schools and more than a third of secondary schools were included, each with a proven track record of securing high achievement in some aspect of their practice for the disadvantaged group. In addition, two schools with particularly high levels of pupil mobility were also invited to participate. The initial phases of the research focused on primary and secondary schools with visits to early years settings and special schools added later.

- Phase 1: Pilot of Primary school research process in 3 schools to test out the research methodology followed by a further 12 schools to complete the first phase of analysis (Nov2015-Feb2016)
- Phase 2: School research visits completed in primary sector– total 30 schools (Mar-Jul 2016)
- Phase 3: School research visits in secondary sector (June 2016 – January 2017)
- Phase 4: Testing out the research findings in other schools (September 2017-January 2017)
- Phase 5: School research visits to early years settings and special schools to test out the research findings in other educational contexts (April – August 2017).

Design process

School information was collected during the three phases of the study. The responses from each collection stage informed the adaptation of instruments used in the data collection of this study. First, prior to delivery the research team designed an open-ended interview template to be piloted during phase one of the research. Second, the interview template was tested in three schools, following which the questions were reviewed and further refined by the research team for use with the wider sample of schools during the remainder of phase one (n=15). Third, following the first part of phase one of the research with 15 schools, the research team undertook the first coded analysis of the data and as a

result further refined the interview template to include 10 key questions about primary/secondary transition. In addition, the key findings from phase one were included into the interview template to ensure the research team tested the initial findings for validity during future school visits.

The interview template was designed to collect qualitative data from senior leaders and other staff and parents about the school's approach to delivering high achievement for all pupils including disadvantaged groups of pupils. The interview template was composed of three elements: contextual school data including performance data, interview sections 1-4, and survey of programmes used to produce high achievement for all groups of pupils.

The standardised template used during the school visit included the following elements:

- Contextual information about the school
- Interview sections:
 - Section 1: Leadership – 16 questions (A further 10 Transition questions were added to this section for use during Phase 2 and 3 of the study. In addition, the key findings from Phase 1 were tested for validity during school visits in Phases 2 and 3).
 - Section 2: Teaching – 5 questions
 - Section 3: Pupils – 9 questions
 - Section 4: Parents – focus on school provision/support for parental involvement and engagement.
- Information about programmes used with disadvantaged groups of pupils.

Data collection

All schools were visited by at least one of four members of the research team

The purpose of the school visits was to answer two over-arching questions:

1. What strategic decisions are being taken by the school's leadership to drive high achievement for the disadvantaged group?
2. How are these decisions being operationalised in classrooms by staff and with pupils and their families?

Schools were contacted via email by the research team explaining the purpose of the study and invited to participate. As schools agreed to participate in the study, to help the senior leadership and staff reflect on the questions prior to interview, the school was sent the standardised

template of questions in advance of the visit. Schools were informed of the length of the visit (2 to 2.5 hours) and asked to construct a timetable that suited the school to include the various aspects contained in the notebook.

A standardised template of questions designed for use with senior leaders, middle leaders, teachers and other adults including parents was used to structure the open ended interview process in every school. Pupil interviews were not routinely conducted during the study.

Following each school visit, the researcher compiled a summary report of the visit, identifying areas of practice to be developed in case study format by schools. Schools were then invited to complete case studies to be shared with other schools via the [Transforming Tees website](#) and in some cases to be presented during school-led seminars (termly) to senior leaders across the Tees Valley local authority areas. Significantly, these case studies provided by schools enabled the research team to check the previous data collected from the visit for internal validity focusing on accuracy of fit, and for external validity deepening understanding of the findings through the combination of multiple readings.

Data analysis

A mixed methods approach was adopted to gather and analyse the views of interviewees about how the school focuses on high achievement for all pupils including those who are disadvantaged. This approach shaped data collection and interpretation, including understanding substantive meanings in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Data analysis took an iterative form, with data sifted and coded at 5 stages. Data was collated at each stage and themes were identified informing the sequential stage of data collection. Initial school views were collected during the pilot in 3 schools (stage 1). These interviews informed the refinement of the interview questions for the school interviews during the remainder of Phase 1. Data collected from the interviews was further thematised in line with the emergent themes from previous analysis (stage 2). These findings were further checked for plausibility at following school interviews, using respondent validation checking for the viability of the interpretation of emergent themes by the researchers (stage 3). The initial thematic analysis of the interviews during Phase 1, was collated into one data set where the qualitative open questions were thematically coded using themes related to the key questions (stage 4). These key themes were then tested for validity during school interviews in Phases 2 and 3 and against the in depth case studies which schools completed post school visit (stage 5). Coding was conducted by members of the research team and discussed as a group, enhancing internal validity. These were further tested with a core group of four headteachers from the first phase research schools and with Sir John Dunford, former government pupil premium champion.

Triangulation of data from the school visit interview question template and school case studies in particular provided a rich narrative in line with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The various data collection points checked for internal validation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Based on Denzin, external validity was sought through triangulation of the data (2009). Therefore, both methods triangulation of qualitative data, and triangulation of sources using various qualitative data collection points were used to secure the findings.

References

Denzin, N.K. (2009) *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods*, EDS Publications Ltd.

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A.L. (1999) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*, Chicago: Aldine Transaction

Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (2015) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 4th edition, SAGE Publications, Inc.

Fieldwork notebooks were used to record evidence and ensure consistency across all the schools in the sample. The provisional findings are recorded under 'leadership characteristics' and 'implementation strategies'.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Part 1: THE SEVEN KEY DRIVERS UNDERPINNING HIGH ACHIEVEMENT

As the research progressed, *seven key drivers* emerged consistently as being particularly significant in the high outcomes achieved for disadvantaged pupils. Each driver has been carefully tracked through to the work of teachers and other adults in classrooms and through wider pastoral work with pupils and with their families. It should be noted however, that given their size and complexity, the research focus in special and secondary schools was specifically targeted on a particular aspect of their performance. Where there is a separation in the findings between phases this has been noted in the text below.

The seven key drivers: a sense of hierarchy

There appears to be an element of hierarchy at work here in that the first driver, *equity*, is key to the formulation of policy and strategy and sets the direction for each school's work. This was also clearly reinforced in the subsequent visits to early years settings and in special schools. However, individual drivers are not in themselves delivering high outcomes; it is the skills set used by senior leaders in coordinating these different elements to suit a school's particular context that makes them collectively so powerful.

The seven key drivers

KD1 Strategies in these schools are driven by an equity model of school provision (see definition below)

KD2 Each school works to a set of non-negotiable benchmarks within a well-honed culture of high expectations about the performance of all groups (that includes behaviour and attitudes) and applies equally to children and adults.

KD3 Intelligent analysis and accountability protocols are engrained in the work of each school to ensure:

- a. There is a constant review of the quality of educational and pastoral provision
- b. That actions being taken are constantly checked so that changes can be made when a better way of meeting need is identified
- c. Data and observational evidence is key to driving swift but carefully focused interventions when pupils are at risk of falling behind or experiencing difficulties
- d. There is smart use of performance information and pastoral information at whole school, group and individual pupil level

KD4 A differentiated professional improvement culture, that invests substantial resource in leadership, teacher and staff development, including research, is securely in place

KD5 Each school has a well-honed culture of shared staff accountability for pupils' achievement

KD6 Leaders adhere to the principle of 'licensed autonomy' (for teachers and leaders at all levels) that recognises staff capability and encourages innovation

KD7 There is substantial, but intelligent investment in securing pupils' academic progress, their personal development and mental health. Significant resource is similarly targeted in providing familial support with targeted engagement particularly for the most vulnerable families often using a single point of contact acting as a confidence builder.

Key driver characteristics are shown through:

1. An equity driven model of school provision:

'Equity in education is the means to achieving equality. It aims to provide the best opportunities for all students to achieve their full potential and act to address any disadvantage which restricts educational achievement. It involves special treatment or action taken to tackle the historical and social disadvantages that prevent learners from accessing and benefiting from education on equal grounds. Equity measures may not be equal for all, but are implemented to ensure fairness and equality of outcome.' World Education Forum 2015

- Equitable strategies drive everything else and are delivered uncompromisingly.
- Provision for pupils is constantly reviewed to gain maximum effect from the available resources.
- Experimentation and innovation by staff is encouraged, they are constantly seeking new ways of meeting the needs of pupils.
- These schools change tack when actions don't work well enough.
- *Resources are directly targeted so that 'special treatment or action (can be) taken to tackle the historical and social disadvantages that prevent learners from accessing and benefiting from education on equal grounds (can occur).'* World Education Forum 2015

- There exists a definitive collective moral purpose that pervades the work of all adults and which ensures a secure focus on the needs of all learners (including adults).
- There is a relentless and uncompromising drive to deliver high quality teaching and learning for all pupils and ensure that the learning needs and achievement of all pupils are kept under constant review.
- In special school contexts, while equity remains the most prominent driver of educational provision, resources are focused primarily on each pupil's particular needs irrespective of whether they are disadvantaged or not.

2. There are non-negotiable expectations about the performance of all groups of learners and adults

- There is no compromise - very high expectations for the disadvantaged group, to include academic performance and personal attributes, are set and maintained.
- Significant emphasis is placed on developing strong learning behaviours and resilience in pupils.
- There is substantial investment in achieving high attendance including successful work with hard-to-reach families.
- The physical environment provides an outstanding resource to support pupils' learning and progress.

3. Intelligent analysis and accountability drives constant review of provision and provides focus for interventions

- There is an incisive understanding of pupils' achievement and their social/emotional needs.
- There are swift interventions to introduce changes in provision when pupils are at risk of falling behind.
- Schools work from an evidence based set of solutions that amounts to a library of strategies.
- Accountability is based upon a clear line-of-sight from teacher/staff classroom performance through to pupils' learning and progress.
- A comprehensive understanding of pupils' current achievement and the ability to track performance accurately over time.
- The expertise to undertake routine comparison against the performance of similar schools and national trends.
- Early years research evidence points to swift identification and intervention to support young children's needs, including in those settings that offer two-year-old provision. Examples were observed of specialist staff working with individual pupils to support their emotional needs so that teaching and other support staff are able to remain focused on teaching and learning. In those institutions where two-year-old provision has been in place for some time, improvements in the performance of young children in Foundation Stage Profile assessments has been significant.

4. A professional improvement culture that invests substantial resource in leadership, teacher and staff development

- These schools invest substantial resource in the professional improvement of staff including those in leadership positions, teachers and other adults.
- There is an entitlement to regular, relevant and high quality professional training.
- There is development of expertise at all levels within the staffing structure and an expectation that all staff will demonstrate leadership in their area of expertise.
- These schools show a commitment to active in-school research.
- They strive to expand staff knowledge of effective practice by accessing relevant training often by using the outcomes of national and international research programmes.

5. A culture of shared accountability for pupils' achievement

- There is an uncompromising recognition that all staff, including teaching assistants and ancillary staff, must play a full part in raising achievement.
- A workforce that takes responsibility and every opportunity for developing their own capacity to make a full contribution to pupils' learning and progress.
- An established performance management culture that directly informs staff development programmes.

6. Licensed autonomy that celebrates staff expertise and encourages innovation

- For staff that consistently demonstrate highly effective skills and knowledge they are offered licensed autonomy to be innovative and are encouraged to experiment.
- This approach underpins the school's drive to constantly search for better forms of provision so these schools are genuine learning communities.
- Teachers and adults have the autonomy to shape their teaching to the needs of the children according to individual and cohort requirements.

7. High investment in familial support and engagement

- While this is a striking feature of all successful schools, there is a sense of priority given to familial engagement and support in early years settings. In the schools visited, there is key emphasis on building successful relationships with parents often involving other agencies.
- Settings place a high priority on supporting the building of home school confidence and supporting parents' skills' development so they are better able to aid their child's development (both academic and behavioural). This includes those institutions with 2-year-old provision where intensive and effective work of family support workers is particularly prevalent.
- All the work with families and external agencies is designed to maintain stability around each child by minimising negative influences on their learning and progress. In early years settings examples were observed where specialist staff work with individual pupils to support their emotional needs so that teaching and other support staff are able to remain focused on teaching and learning
- Highly experienced staff are used to engage directly with the most vulnerable families focusing primarily on pupils' attendance and educational engagement.
- They have effective local intelligence networks so they can be alerted to changing familial circumstances that enables them to be pro-active in their approach. They are able to rapidly deploy bespoke and specialist support to tackle emerging difficulties.

Part 2: How these schools make key research drivers operational:

1. An equity driven model of school provision

- Intelligence led resourcing is highly effective in meeting the needs of learners and their families at all key stages
- In these schools, there is substantial on-going investment in training so there is the timely acquisition of specialist skills to match pupils' individual learning circumstances
- Assessment regimes provide up-to-date, deep knowledge of individual children's needs and these underpin each school's capacity for swift and finely tuned interventions
- These schools have developed a curriculum that is well-planned and well-matched to pupils' age and stage of development is fully catered for and that offers significant enrichment opportunities within and beyond the school day
- Systems have been developed that enable rapid response to changing familial circumstances in order to maintain stability for pupils/enabling parents to support children's learning.

2. Non-negotiable expectations about the performance of all groups of learners and adults

- Expectations of pupils' capabilities are high in all research schools and for all groups of learners.
- All pupils are set challenging and specific targets
- Detailed curriculum mapping is in place which ensures that the age and stage of development of specific groups and individuals are fully catered for including for those institutions offering provision for two-year-old children
- There is an emphasis on developing pupils' key learning skills, including resilience, which enables them to sustain a commitment to their work
- Children demonstrate genuine enjoyment of learning and show a willingness for sustained engagement in lesson activities
- There are established expectations about attendance and punctuality that are regularly reinforced and that successfully target the hardest-to-reach families. In early years settings, and before statutory age school commences, staff are successfully establishing positive attendance behaviours that are having a noticeable impact when children reach the age of five.

3. Intelligent analysis and accountability protocols that drive constant review of provision and that focus interventions

- In these schools, precise tracking of pupils' academic performance is followed through with rapid response when they are at risk of falling behind
- Effective use is made of existing staff specialisms, and the acquisition of new ones, to target interventions and deliver specific elements of the curriculum
- There is flexibility of timetabling to respond to pupils' emerging needs
- The use of multi-faceted tracking to ensure that a careful eye is kept on all aspects of pupils' development so that emerging problems can be quickly identified and a response made
- Regular team meetings are used to examine pupils' progress and outcomes and to agree the next stage of provision. This is a particularly strong feature in early years settings.

4. A professional improvement culture that invests substantial resource in teacher and staff development

- Staff demonstrate excellent pedagogical knowledge with a high degree of specialism that reflects the range of specific pupil needs
- Careful deployment of adult expertise results from a deep understanding of pupils' needs
- A strong commitment to regular review of practice often resulting from school-led action research programmes and knowledge gained from wider research.

5. A culture of shared accountability for pupils' achievement (these findings were predominantly found in the primary research cohort)

- Performance management processes are integral to achieving school targets and priorities in all school phases
- In the early years, special and primary school cohort, all adults are engaged in lesson planning, delivery and assessment
- All adult contributions to the process are valued with tightly targeted deployment and a shared responsibility for tracking pupil progress
- In several schools, most notably primary, all adults lead on specific aspects of the curriculum, including teaching assistants and ancillary staff
- In some schools, and in all school phases, parent support workers provide some specialist support for the most vulnerable families that includes:

- Finding resolution for families in crisis including mental health support
- Supporting parents to engage in their child's learning (including the provision of parent courses)
- Communication and consolidation of pupil learning with parents using digital communication.

6. Licensed autonomy that celebrates staff expertise and encourages innovation

- Effective performance management aligned to well-developed professional development has resulted in high quality teaching and learning
- Staff are encouraged to be innovative and to constantly search for new ways of meeting the needs of pupils
- Flexible curriculum delivery constantly maps provision against cohort, group and individual needs
- Regular staff dialogue leads to a collective reshaping, developing and reviewing of the curriculum to ensure it is consistently fit for purpose
- Robust systems are in place for the development and support of less experienced and/or weaker members of staff.

7. High investment in familial support and engagement particularly for the most vulnerable

- All schools, and prominently in early years settings, have a definitive strategy to engage with families sometimes involving a dedicated team who are the front line in supporting the most vulnerable
- All staff demonstrate a commitment to parental engagement as crucial to supporting pupils' learning and progress
- In several schools, specialist staff are deployed to work with the most vulnerable families
- Delivery of parent learning programmes are in place to ensure that enrichment activities involve vulnerable parents as well as pupils to broaden their experiences and to help support their child's education. A notable feature in early years settings.
- Informal events are routinely organised to remove barriers and to encourage parents into school to share in the education of their children.